

Owen Lovejoy: “A True Hero of the Antislavery Movement”

Allyson Litteken
All Saints Academy, Breese
Teacher: Stephanie Garcia

Owen Lovejoy, a true hero, and a practical, undaunted man was a fearless anti-slavery leader during the 1800s. He was the son of a Congregational minister and a brother of a martyr who fought fiercely for slaves' rights. Owen was an abolitionist who insisted that government should be the instrument protecting civil rights.

Owen Lovejoy grew up on a farm in Albion, Maine. Even though Lovejoy graduated from Bowdoin College, Brunswick, in 1832, with a degree in law and theology he practiced neither. After his father's death, he dropped out of college. His mother chided him about his lack of faith. Taking his mother's advice, Lovejoy studied for the ministry and practiced it for the next seventeen years.

In 1836, Owen moved to Alton, Illinois, to assist his brother, Elijah, in publishing the Observer, a Presbyterian newspaper, for which Owen and Elijah were editors. Previously, the Observer was published in St. Louis, Missouri, but later was moved to Alton. The paper advocated that all men are created equal. The two editors wanted freedom for all slaves and considered it to be the slaves' basic right. Many others demanded that the brothers cease writing about anti-slavery issues. Soon after, Elijah was killed by a white pro-slavery mob. At his funeral Owen vowed he would never “forsake the cause sprinkled with his brother's blood.” From that moment on Owen dedicated himself to the antislavery cause. In 1838 he and his older brother, Joseph, co-edited a book for the American Anti-Slavery Society, His Brothers Blood, a memoir on their brother Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy. The book included letters and newspaper articles

Elijah had written as editor of the Observer. Besides publishing a book on Elijah, the two brothers, together, composed a poem published in 1862.

After publishing His Brothers Blood, Owen moved to Princeton, Illinois, in 1863, where he pursued his ministry and served as a pastor of a Congregational Church. However, he continued fighting for the rights of blacks to be free, wanting blacks to share in social and political equality. Owen, as a member of the Liberty Party, became active in a campaign against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which legalized slavery. As well, he was a conductor on the Underground Railroad. As a member of the Liberty Party, Owen also wrote and presented many speeches. Once, while in Massachusetts, Lovejoy gave 50 speeches on behalf of the Liberty Party. The Whig editor of the Lowell Daily Chronicle wrote, “We listened to an address at the City Hall by Rev. Owen Lovejoy of Illinois, a brother of the brave Lovejoy who was slain by the mob at Alton. He is a very good speaker, and we should think a tolerably honest man, though it was difficult to reconcile some of his statements.” While speaking to both national parties, Owen criticized the parties, given that he was anti-slavery.

Owen labored twenty years in the anti-slavery cause before he was elected to office. In October 1854 Owen began campaigning for the state legislature from Bureau County, Illinois. The following year Owen spoke to the General Assembly. His speeches included the repealing of all laws that disqualified colored people from testifying in court. First, Lovejoy was a member of the General Assembly. A year later he became an Illinois Republican congressman and was reelected in 1869 and again in the following two years. As a devoted member of the House of Representatives, Owen

spoke frequently against slavery. From 1857 to 1864 he denounced slavery, persuading people from across the nation with his mesmerizing speeches.

Owen Lovejoy believed that the “liberty of all men was an inalienable gift from God.” Like his brother, Owen was convinced that “slaveholders were struggling against the providence of God.” At the time Lovejoy served as a member of the house, he came to know President Lincoln, and worked hard for Lincoln’s reelection in 1860. He strongly urged Lincoln to act against slavery. Nevertheless, Lincoln rejected Owen’s radical views regarding slavery. When Owen died, Lincoln had written in a letter to John Howard Bryant, “he was my most generous friend.” Although Lincoln did reject his movement against slavery, Owen still was greatly influenced by the president.

Owen Lovejoy died in 1864. Throughout his lifetime Owen wrote and gave thirty-nine major speeches across the nation, preaching mostly about slavery. Some took Owen’s words to heart while others continued to harass blacks. Owen continued fighting for slaves to share in the privileges that other Americans enjoyed. Although many of the changes did not occur while Owen was alive, we can see today his motivation has helped many of us live in peace. [From Allan Carpenter, Land of Lincoln; Robert P. Howard, Illinois; Illinois Literature: The Nineteenth Century, “Owen Lovejoy,” <http://history.alliancelibrarysystem.com/IllinoisAlive/files/wi/html/wi000004.cfm> (Sept. 23, 2005); Illinois State Historical Society Symposium, “Owen Lovejoy’s Transformation from the Liberty Party to the Free Soil Party,” www.lovejoysociety.org/Politics/trans_from_parties.htm (Nov. 20, 2005); Joseph C. and Owen Lovejoy, Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy; and Edward Magdol, Owen Lovejoy: Abolitionist in Congress.]

